

APPARATUS FOR PRODUCING A HYDROGEN-RICH
AND LOW CARBON MONOXIDE GAS

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 This application claims the priority of German Patent Application No. 197 27 588.5, filed on June 28, 1997, the disclosure of which is expressly incorporated by reference herein.

10 The present invention relates to a process and a system for generating a high-hydrogen, low-carbon monoxide gas.

15 A system for generating hydrogen by means of partial oxidation and/or the water vapor reforming of methanol is known from German Patent Document DE 44 23 587 C2. In addition to containing hydrogen, the reforming product gas flow also contains carbon monoxide which is undesirable for certain applications, for example, during the conversion of the generated hydrogen in a fuel cell.

20 For eliminating or at least reducing the carbon monoxide fraction in the high-hydrogen gas, it is also known to connect a gas purification stage behind the gas generating device. Such a gas purification stage is known, for example, from German Patent Document DE 195 44 895 C1, in which the carbon monoxide contained in the high-hydrogen gas is selectively oxidized with the addition of oxygen on an oxidation catalyst.

During starting, the gas generating system must be brought to the operating temperature. This can take place, for example, by heating from the outside or by introducing hot gases. From Japanese Patent Document JP 58-108291 A, it is known, for example, to provide a ceramic core with an electric heating device in a reformer. For generating hot gases, for example, a catalytic combustion on a Pt-containing catalyst can be used. From Japanese Patent Document JP 08119602 A, a gas generating system is known, for example, which has a separate catalytic burner. A hot gas is generated there whose energy is transmitted in an evaporator to the gas to be reformed and thus, during the flow through the reformer, is also transmitted to the reformer. A disadvantage of these systems is the fact that additional components are required for the heating, particularly in the starting phase.

It is an object of the present invention to provide a process and apparatus for generating a high-hydrogen, low-carbon monoxide gas with improved cold-starting characteristics.

This problem is solved by a process and a system according to the present invention.

During the normal operation of a gas generating system, the gas flows through a gas purification stage only after it

has flowed through the gas generating device. If a system for the selective CO-oxidation is used as the gas purification stage, which generally contains a platinum-containing catalyst for removing the carbon monoxide from the high-hydrogen gas, the system can temporarily be operated as a catalytic burner during the starting phase in a simple manner by a reversal of the flow direction so that the gas generating system can easily and rapidly be brought to the necessary operating temperature. Additional components, apart from corresponding switching valves, are not required for this purpose. Thus, a compact system is created.

If this flow reversal principle is used in a gas generating device in which, in addition to or instead of the water vapor reforming, partial oxidation is also carried out, another advantage results. A platinum-containing zone which in the normal operation is disposed in front of the reforming area would necessarily lead to a two-stage method of operation. In the normal operation, the oxygen in the gas flow would be completely consumed in the platinum-containing zone, which is highly active for the combustion. As a result, large amounts of heat are released in the platinum-containing zone which must be transported into the reforming area. Should this two-stage operating method not be desired, the flow through the platinum-containing zone is permitted only

during the starting phase, which would result in an exclusive use of this component for the starting phase.

In contrast, by means of the system and process according to the present invention, a simple solution is obtained without a separate reactor or reactor area which is used only during the starting phase.

Other objects, advantages and novel features of the present invention will become apparent from the following detailed description of the invention when considered in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a basic diagram of a system for generating a high-hydrogen, low-carbon monoxide gas with the valve shifting positions during normal operation; and

Figure 2 is a view of the system of Figure 1 with the valve shifting positions during a starting phase.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The system for generating a high-hydrogen, low-carbon monoxide gas indicated as a whole by reference number 1 in

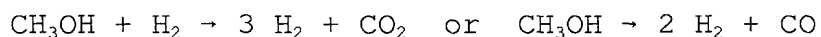
Figure 1 and in the following called gas generating system, consists of a gas generating device 2 and of a gas purification stage 3. The gas generating device 2 may be constructed as a reactor for the catalytic water vapor reforming of a water vapor/fuel mixture (i.e, "reformer"), or as a reactor for the partial oxidation of an oxygen/fuel mixture. In addition, it is also possible to integrate the reactor for the partial oxidation in the reformer in that a suitable oxidation catalyst is preferably arranged in the inlet area of the reformer.

The gas purification stage 3 is constructed as the device for the selective carbon monoxide oxidation (i.e., "CO-oxidator"). In normal operation, the product gas is guided from the gas generating device 2 directly into the gas purification stage 3. The gas generating system 1 is preferably constructed as a heat exchanger, a heat exchanger surface 16 being provided between the gas generating device 2 and the gas purification stage 3. Any hydrocarbon-containing starting substances can be used as fuel, the following embodiment being explained by means of methanol as the fuel.

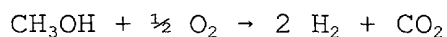
A gaseous water vapor/methanol mixture is supplied to the gas generating device 2 by way of a feed pipe 6. For generating the water vapor/methanol mixture, an evaporator 17 is provided to which water and liquid methanol is supplied

from corresponding storage tanks 20, 21 by means of delivery pumps, which are not shown, by way of corresponding pipes 18, 19. For the metering of the media, or for the activating/deactivating of the delivery, metering valves 22, 23 are provided in the pipes 18, 19. The water vapor/methanol mixture generated in the evaporator 17 is then, in the normal operation, by way of the pipe 8 and the two-way valve 4 fed into the pipe 6. In this switching condition of the two-way valve 4, the connection between the pipe 6 and a pipe 10 is interrupted. If an oxidation catalyst is provided in the gas generating device 2, a suitable amount of oxygen or air is metered to the water vapor/methanol mixture by way of an oxygen supply pipe 15 with an integrated metering valve 24.

During the catalytic water vapor reforming of methanol, while heat is supplied, a mixture of methanol and water vapor is converted to hydrogen on a suitable catalyst; carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide are generated simultaneously:

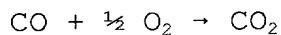


As an alternative, or in addition, methanol may also be converted while adding oxygen by a partial oxidation to carbon dioxide and hydrogen:



The CO oxidator 3 is used for removing CO, by means of a selective oxidation of carbon monoxide, from the high-hydrogen gas generated in the gas generating device 2. The product gas consisting, for example, of hydrogen and carbon dioxide with a CO fraction of 1 - 3 % by volume, after a corresponding purification, is preferably used for the mobile application of PEM fuel cells in vehicles.

In the case of the partial or selective oxidation, oxygen is also added to the product gas, for example, in the form of ambient air, in which case the carbon monoxide CO is then oxidized by the oxygen O₂ to carbon dioxide CO₂:



As an alternative, the oxygen can also be charged at one or several points directly into the CO oxidator 3, for example, by way of an additional pipe which, however, is not shown in the embodiment. The reaction is carried out on a suitable oxidation catalyst, such as platinum and/or ruthenium, on a suitable carrier, such as Al₂O₃ or a zeolite in powder form. After the purification of the product gas, the high-hydrogen, low-carbon-monoxide gas is then removed by way of the pipe 7, the two-way valve 5 and the pipe 11 to a receiver which is not shown, such as a storage device or a fuel cell.

Furthermore, the storage tank 21 for the methanol is connected by way of another pipe 9 with the two-way valve 5. However, in the normal operation, this pipe 9 is blocked by the two-way valve 5. In addition, a second oxygen feed pipe 14 with an integrated metering valve 25 is provided on the pipe 9. Finally, for controlling the whole system, a control apparatus 12 is provided which is connected with the valves 4, 5, 22-25 by way of control lines.

During the normal operation, the two-way valves 4,5 are held in the illustrated position of Figure 1 by means of the control apparatus 12. The metering valve 25 is closed. The positions of the metering valves 22 to 24 are adjusted corresponding to a load demand.

The water vapor reforming is an endothermal reaction. This means that energy must be continuously supplied to the reformer for maintaining the reaction. Since the CO oxidation is a highly exothermal reaction, the reformer 2 and the CO oxidator 3 are preferably integrated in a common housing so that the energy released in the CO oxidator can be transmitted to the reformer 2 by way of the heat exchange surface 16. Naturally, it is also possible to heat the reformer separately by a heat exchanger integrated in the reformer so that the integration in a common housing is unnecessary.

Figure 2 illustrates the device explained in Figure 1 in the switching position during the starting phase, in which case, with respect to Figure 1, the same parts have identical reference numbers.

5 During the start, the control apparatus 12 brings the two-way valves 4, 5 into the illustrated switching positions. Simultaneously, the metering valves 22 to 24 are closed and the metering valve 25 is opened. As a result, no more water and methanol is supplied to the evaporator 17 or into the pipe 8. On the contrary, methanol and oxygen, which is supplied by way of line 14, are fed by way of the two-way valve 5 and the pipe 7 into the CO oxidator 3 and oxidized there on the CO oxidation catalyst. The CO oxidator with the oxidation catalyst contained therein is therefore temporarily used as a catalytic burner. By means of this catalytic oxidation, 10 thermal energy is released. The hot gas will then flow through the gas generating device 2 which, as the result, is rapidly brought to the operating temperature. After flowing through the gas generating device 2, the gas is then by way of the pipe 6, the two-way valve 4 and the pipe 10 discharged 15 into the environment or to a catalyst, which is not shown, for utilizing the residual gas. By means of the switching operations initiated by the control apparatus 12, the flow direction in the gas generating system is therefore reversed 20 in the starting phase in comparison to the normal operation. 25

The starting phase is terminated, for example, after a defined time period or when a defined temperature in the system 1 is reached. The feeding of the fuel/oxygen mixture to the CO oxidator 3 will then be stopped by means of the control apparatus 12 by triggering the valves 4, 5, 22 to 25. Subsequently, the gas generating system 1 will then be operated in the above described manner.

In addition to the arrangement illustrated in the drawing, other embodiments are also conceivable. For example, the pipe 9 and the second oxygen supply pipe 14 can be eliminated. Instead, between the mouth of the oxygen supply pipe 15 and the two-way valve 4, a bypass pipe can branch off pipe 8 which is then, instead of pipe 9, connected with the two-way valve 5 for supplying a methanol/oxygen mixture during the starting phase. In this case, during the starting phase, water can then also be metered in from the storage tank 20.

Furthermore, the gas generating device 2 as well as the gas purification stage 3 can be constructed in several stages, in which case, in the starting phase, the flow can take place through one or several stages in the reversed flow direction. It is only important that the flow first takes place through the stages of the CO oxidator 3 and this stage will then be used as a catalytic burner. In the illustrated embodiment, in the starting phase, not only the sequence of the components 2,

3 is exchanged but the flow direction within the components 2,
3 is also reversed. However, it is also conceivable to
exchange by means of a suitable guiding of the pipes the
sequence of the components 2, 3 during the starting phase but
5 to maintain the flow direction within the components 2, 3.

The foregoing disclosure has been set forth merely to
illustrate the invention and is not intended to be limiting.
Since modifications of the disclosed embodiments incorporating
the spirit and substance of the invention may occur to persons
10 skilled in the art, the invention should be construed to
include everything within the scope of the appended claims and
equivalents thereof.